

# PRESS ON CALABRIA

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## Alone at Sunset In a Land Without Singles

By MARK ROTELLA

LAST year, I visited Reggio di Calabria, a city of 200,000 on the toe of Italy's boot. While Reggio is far from being Italy's most beautiful city, it is known for having a passeggiata with incredible views of Sicily. Walking Reggio's wide boardwalk with a nice breeze and views of the lights of Messina, I joined the city's evening stroll of couples holding hands, groups of teenagers, and children running around their parents.

Like most people who visit Italy, I love the food, the wine and the communal evening strolls -- the exuberant, expressive atmosphere is irresistible. I have visited Italy almost a dozen times, usually traveling with my parents or my wife. But this time I went back by myself. I couldn't have felt better prepared -- I spoke the language, could understand dialect and had a contract to write a book about Calabria. But I was in for a surprise. I never expected to feel alone in one of the most sociable countries in the world. I found that it's precisely because Italians are so social that the solo traveler -- however outgoing -- can feel an acute sense of loneliness.

Every city, town or village in Italy has an unstated but universally understood time during which the entire population, dressed nicely, goes out for a walk. No one discusses it; they all just converge to find one another out on the street.

On my first passeggiata by myself in Reggio, I turned away from Sicily and watched everyone stroll by. It occurred to me that the only other person alone was a man in his 30's leaning against the boardwalk railing. He was talking on his cellphone and looking around anxiously. A moment later, a woman wearing stylishly snug pants and high-heeled sandals walked up to him as she dropped her cellphone into her purse. They embraced and kissed, clearly relieved to have found each other. I began to think of my wife, who was back in New York. I wanted to look out over the Strait of Messina with her and feel the cool breeze. Italy's beauty is meant to be shared.

Since I enjoy talking with people, I assumed I wouldn't have a problem starting a conversation. I struggled with the idea of how to introduce myself, perhaps sliding down on a bench next to an older couple sitting in silence, watching everyone walk by. I thought I might ask directions of someone in a group of Italians my age, then segue into a conversation. Perhaps I might even get the courage to approach a group of Italian girls, whose embarrassed giggles I always found endearing. But it's intimidating to approach a group, whether 10 people or 2, where outsiders are accepted only slowly.

And the concept of solitude itself seems unfamiliar in southern Italy. In fact, in Italian the word for "alone" and "lonely" is the same, "solo." Italians, it seems to me, are simply never by themselves -- when they do find themselves alone, usually when they are in transit, they are talking on their cellphones. Anyone I approached would wonder why no one was with me. Eventually, they would start to feel uncomfortable.

I decided the best way to fill time was to do what any Italian would do -- eat. I went to La Bracieria, hoping to find comfort in this restaurant that specialized in Calabrese home-style cooking. I was drinking a glass of red wine when the appetizer came. The waiter set down an embarrassingly large portion of thinly sliced eggplant, zucchini fritters and an assortment of cheeses and meats -- a single order that was obviously meant to be shared. When I looked up to acknowledge the waiter I realized that everyone in the restaurant was stealing glances at me, some with sympathy, some with curiosity. I felt like the molting goat in a petting zoo that no one wants to touch. It seems that everyone in Italy has at least one family member to take care of him, to eat with him.

Sitting there, I remembered a discussion I overheard in Rome between two Italian women. They were talking about an old man who had just gotten up from a nearby table.

"He's crazy," one woman said.

"He's just quiet," said the other.

"No, he's a little off."

"What makes you say that?" the second woman asked.

"Well, look at him. He eats by himself."

While I was eating fresh grilled vegetables and drinking unadulterated home-made wine, I found myself fantasizing about having a beer in, of all places, a rural Irish pub. There, solitude, experienced by many, is an accepted condition. You can guess that the man sitting next to the empty barstool that you are about to take will be just as eager -- especially plied with enough beer -- to hear your story as you will be to hear his. In a friendly pub even single people have company.

My travels on that solo trip also took me to Gimigliano, a tiny mountaintop village not far from Calabria's provincial capital, Catanzaro. I had relatives in Gimigliano, where I stayed for a month, but every week I would spend a night or two in Catanzaro, a town of 100,000, to exchange money or catch a train to other parts of the region.

In Catanzaro, Da Salvatore trattoria became my home away from home. Each time I ate at Da Salvatore I was escorted to the same table -- not one by the bathrooms or a service door as the solitary diner might expect, but at a choice table by the window in the center of the room. Massimo, the headwaiter, knew that I had relatives in his hometown, Gimigliano, and that I was traveling around Calabria doing research. Each time he would ask me how my trip was, and each time he would ask when would I return to Gimigliano. Massimo couldn't quite understand why I would want to travel by myself -- and why I was not back in the village eating with my cousins, aunts and uncles. The conversation usually ended just as my food was served. In silence I would drink my wine and eat each of my three courses.

A few months later, I went back to Italy -- this time with my wife and parents. They were eager to visit the family down south, so we flew to Calabria for a couple of days. Because our plane arrived late, we decided to spend a night in Catanzaro before driving into the mountains to Gimigliano. We went to Da Salvatore, and as I walked in the door Massimo spotted me and said, "Signore Rotella, table for one?"

I felt a rush of pride as I said, "No, tonight I am with my family."

The waiter smiled, almost relieved, and called to one of the junior waiters, "Table for Signore Rotella and his family -- quickly."

END

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